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How Milosevic's Serbia Became A Fascist State

Branka Magas <ampgt;https://againstthecurrent.org/branka-magas>

THE WAR IN former Yugoslavia, and the particular nature of Western intervention in it, have produced a variety of reactions on the international left. These range from outright support for the Serbian regime — by way of a position of equidistance from aggressor and victim — to outright condemnation of Serbian aggression against Bosnia and, less often, also of that against Croatia.

The positions taken involve divergent understandings of the nature of the previous Communist regime, the causes and implications of its demise, the legitimacy of the successor states and the political character of the parties running them.

The attitude of most left groups has been determined more often than not by older divisions among them — divisions that go back to their view of October 1917 and its aftermath. **(I)** Only in rare cases has it been based on any actual study of the state and society in former Yugoslavia.

Most specifically, the left's confusion regarding the

nature of the war and what to do about it lies in its failure to recognize the fact that present-day Serbia is a fascist state. [\(2\)](#) This article aims to explain why this is the case.

The rise of fascism is a complex phenomenon and requires detailed examination of its social origins and political forms. It would be wrong to reduce our understanding of fascism to replicas of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy or Franco Spain. At the same time, there are very definite structural similarities. These include: a radical subversion of the constitutional order; gutting of working class as well as liberal-democratic resistance; total mobilization by the state around a chauvinist ideology that includes a mythologized view of the past; militarism and permanent warfare against domestic and foreign enemies, who are presented as a seamless unity; a yearning for a reordering of the international order on a suitably reactionary basis.

Fascism cannot triumph without winning support among all social layers. A proper analysis of Serbian fascism demands a re-examination of the country's socio-economic formation and the political forces it has produced — something impossible to do here. What follows, therefore, is an outline argument — more a description than an exhaustive analysis. I begin by examining the ways in which Serbia behaved differently from the other republics of former Yugoslavia immediately before and during the transition to post- Communism.

I then go on to specify the three key elements which qualify it as fascist: a) Milosevic's subversion of Yugoslavia's constitutional order, leading to political chaos and the country's breakup; b) the wars of territorial aggression waged to establish a Greater Serbia, as pillar of a reactionary "new order" in the Balkans; c) the state ideology of racial purity, committed to the establishment of a Serb lebensraum, which has led to the mass murder or forced deportation of hundreds of thousands of non-Serb civilians in the occupied territories of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The Apparatus: Continuity in Discontinuity

Serbia is unique among the former republics/provinces of Yugoslavia, in that the old ruling Communist party — the League of Communists of Serbia (LCS), renamed in 1990 Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) — has remained continuously in power. This means the uninterrupted rule of the party and its machinery, much more than simply the emergence of figures from the old regime in the new post-Communist one. Serbia in this regard is a unique case also in Eastern Europe, with the partial exception of Romania. The continuity of Communist party rule has ensured also the continuity of the former state apparatus: in the civil and economic administration, the police and the army.

Superficially this is true also of Montenegro: Here too the old Communist party rules under a new name as the Democratic Socialist Party. Its power, however, is strictly limited, since Montenegro is no longer a sovereign state, having lost all autonomy as a result of the coup d'état planned, organized and implemented by Belgrade at the start of 1989<197>a time when Yugoslavia was still in existence. During that year, Serbia gained full control also of two other members of the Yugoslav federation, Kosova and Vojvodina, destroying in the process their state structures. [An extensive description of this process appeared in ATC 18, "The Strange Death of Tito's Yugoslavia?" by Michele Lee, Jan.-Feb. 1989 — ed.]

The fact that Montenegro still exists as a separate state is due solely to Serbia's desire to present the "union" of the two — the so-called Federal Republic of Yugoslavia — as the only legitimate successor to the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, in order to claim the totality of the latter's assets as well as its seat in such international bodies as the UN and the IMF.

If successful in this claim, Serbia would escape the relatively laborious process of international recognition, which is bound to be linked to some sort of constitutional concessions to its numerous national minorities, the Albanian one in particular. In other words the "Federal Republic of Yugoslavia" has become in reality a unitary Greater Serbia, realized by "peaceful" means immediately prior to the collapse of

Yugoslavia in 1990-91.

Serbia could achieve this extension of its borders only through subversion of Yugoslavia's constitutional order, hence also the destruction of the Yugoslav federation. It is quite clear today that preparations for this, including plans for "ethnic cleansing," began surreptitiously in the last few years of Tito's life. His death, it was assumed, would open a process of a fundamental reorganization in republican and provincial constitutional relations.

Everything that happened in the 1980s — from the Serb demonstrations in Kosova in 1981 through the reorganization of military districts in the mid-1980s to Serbia's economic boycott of Slovenia and the collapse of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (LCY) in 1990 — must now be seen as steps towards this goal. This strategy required also the removal of all opponents to it in Serbia itself, something successfully accomplished in the extensive party purges of 1987-8, by the end of which Milosevic had become a virtual dictator in Serbia.

Despite the continuity of Communist rule in Serbia, however, the break with Yugoslavia involved such a radical alteration of the Serb republic's political and cultural life — a recasting of all historical points of reference in the minds of its people — that it is appropriate to describe what happened in Serbia between 1987 and 1990 as a rightwing revolution. This was a reaction not only to "the gains of Communist-led revolution," but also against the whole inheritance associated with the Enlightenment and the French Revolution.

In return, the nation was offered the Kosovo Myth — a return to the mythical medieval past. [See the author's "Mythology and Genocide," ATC 48, Jan.-Feb. 1994 — ed.] What Trotsky once said about Nazism provides an apt description of Milosevic's Serbia: "There lives alongside the 20th century the 10th or the 13th."

This rupture in Serbia's history was appropriately named by Latinka Perovic, former Serbian Communist party leader and the foremost authority

on modern Serbian history, as “Serbia’s historic defeat.” In her view, the forces of modernity — liberalism, democracy and socialism — though always in a minority, had been present in Serbian society since the early decades of the 19th Century. They have now been decisively defeated, as shown by the complete absence of an alternative national program. All political forces are in favor of a Greater Serbia, though there are those like opposition politician Vuk Draskovic who question the <MI>methods<D> by which it is achieved. (As if there were any other way!)

It was this discontinuity within continuity that established the foundations of Serbian fascism.

Why Serbia Was Unique

Yugoslavia’s other four republics — Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia and Slovenia — followed a different path. In each, the League of Communists lost the first multi-party elections to other, nationalist parties (with the partial exception of Macedonia, where for a while Communists governed in coalition with nationalists). Macedonia and Slovenia, it is true, elected former Communists — with proven reform credentials — as their presidents, but their party membership was either frozen or made void. In all these republics as elsewhere in Eastern Europe, elections led to the establishment of a new state apparatus, with only a tenuous link to the past so far as personnel and organizational structures were concerned.

To be sure, the coincidence of the breakup of Yugoslavia with the fall of Communism produced in all republics a reassessment of the past, which in many ways amounted to a purposeful amnesia about — not to say falsification of — history. The break, however, was nowhere so radical as in Serbia, not even in Croatia, despite the new Croatian ruling party’s ambiguous attitude to the Ustasha pro-Nazi quisling state of World War II and despite the Croatian assault on Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1993-4.

It’s true that the creation of the so-called Croat republic of Herzeg-Bosna [in Bosnian territories occupied by Croat militias — ed.] seemed about to

set off a dynamic in Croatia similar to the earlier one in Serbia, as the regime got down to the business of territorial annexations, ethnic cleansing and destruction of mosques, as well as open acts of terrorism against the domestic opposition inside Croatia.

In Croatia, however, the opposition (significantly including the Catholic Church) was too strong, and Croatia's military potential too weak, to allow the process to become self-perpetuating.

Consequences of Communist Strategies

These different outcomes in Serbia and the rest of former Yugoslavia reflected different strategies adopted by ruling Communist parties in the various republics in the aftermath of Gorbachev's abandonment of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall.

In Serbia the ruling party, having purged its liberal and constitutional wings, became an openly chauvinist organization, absorbing in the process individuals and ideas from the extreme right, with whom it formed first tacit, then open alliances and went on to jointly rule Serbia. These allies included the parties of Seselj, Arkan and Jovic — which as subsequent events showed were being trained for special tasks in “ethnic cleansing operations” in Bosnia and Croatia — but also many others, created or heavily infiltrated by the state security service.

By contrast, in Bosnia, Croatia, Macedonia and Slovenia the Communist parties formed alliances if anything to their left, and lost the elections to nationalists and/or conservatives. It is noteworthy that whereas in Serbia Milosevic's ascendancy was couched in the rhetoric of “hardline” Communism and trenchant “Yugoslavism” (the very Yugoslavia his actions were destroying) — emphasis on the unity of Yugoslavia, the LCY and the Yugoslav working class against allegedly disintegrative forces of (con)federalism, party factionalism, bourgeois democracy, western capitalist models, etc. — in the other republics “hardliners” were being defeated by

“reformers.”

Different outcomes, in other words, were crucially linked to the different outcomes of inner-party struggles within each republic. The advent of a multiparty system throughout Yugoslavia became certain only after that option prevailed in December, 1989 in the League of Communists of Croatia, where the decision was aided by a growing premonition of the impending war.

The different republics thus entered the period of Yugoslavia’s breakup and war at differing levels of readiness. In Serbia, Milosevic’s National-Communists took over the old Serbian and federal state apparatus, as well as control of the former Yugoslav army, navy and air force, including all their weapons and military installations; Yugoslav federal property, including the National Bank of Yugoslavia; Yugoslavia’s foreign legations, including its UN seat; and foreign economic representations.

All these federal assets were marshalled for Serbia’s war; it should be remembered in this context how Serbia used Yugoslavia’s UN seat to secure the imposition of an arms embargo upon its intended victims. In Bosnia, Croatia, Macedonia and Slovenia, on the other hand, the new political masters had at first to build a new state apparatus, then to raise a new army — surreptitiously while Yugoslavia was still formally in existence, later openly in wartime conditions, but all the time illegally in the eyes of the “international community.”

Finally, in none of the four other republics was the population psychologically prepared for the war in the way Serbia’s and Montenegro’s had been. This is true especially of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Anti-Serb feelings there grew, in the main, as a result of the experience of aggression.

Just as Italy under Mussolini and Germany under Hitler appeared at first like the “normal” Italy and Germany with which the West was able to “do business,” so too Serbia under Milosevic — and Yugoslavia with Milosevic — appeared like other “socialist” states in Eastern Europe at the time. The

British press, for example, prompted by the Foreign Office, was ready to acclaim Milosevic a new Tito. But Serbia had already acquired the dynamic of a fascist state, which would come to full fruition with the start of its Croatian-Bosnian campaign.

The Subversion of Yugoslavia

If Yugoslavia was to be destroyed, its constitutional order first had to be brought down. Milosevic's first step, as undisputed party leader of the LCS, was to escape the party discipline of the all-Yugoslav LCY. The Rubicon was crossed in 1989, when he refused to accept an LCY Central Committee vote against Serbia's representative on the post-Tito collective party presidency. The effect was to free Serbia from the authority of the federal state, *de facto* if not *de jure*.

Just as Mussolini and Hitler worked within constitutional structures while simultaneously undermining them, so too did Milosevic combine interventions through the system with actions designed to destroy it: for example, mass mobilizations through a well-organized series of "spontaneous" public rallies on an openly Serb-chauvinistic platform, casting the whole of Serbia and Yugoslavia into turmoil.

Milosevic to be sure did not begin his rise to power as an outsider: As president of the LCS he was an important party official. But party officials before him were limited by obedience to the principle of "democratic centralism" (meaning, in this context, collective bureaucratic discipline) — Milosevic wasn't. Characteristically, he threw off all established political constraints in practice, simultaneously of course denouncing his opponents as wreckers of party and Yugoslav unity.

The mass rallies held throughout Serbia during 1987-9 had an effect very similar to Mussolini's March on Rome — many actually took place in the Yugoslav Rome, Belgrade) — or for that matter prior to the elections of 1930; they broke all opposition within the LCY. The annexations that followed destroyed the Yugoslav constitutional order beyond repair.

The Party-State Apparatus in Place

Whereas in Italy and Germany the parliamentary system had to be abolished in order for Mussolini and Hitler to become supreme leaders, Milosevic's Serbia was already a single-party state. This was not enough, however, so long as Serbia remained an integral part of Yugoslavia.

For Milosevic to become supreme master of Serbia, the latter first had to be isolated from Yugoslavia. In addition all potential resistance had to be crushed, down to the smallest municipality. Mass rallies were designed primarily with this aim. There were other forms of pressure: Just as Hitler systematically subverted German local government prior to the installation of full dictatorship in 1933, so also Milosevic in 1987-9 used special detachments of the state security service to replace local party, state and industrial managers in Serbia, later also in Vojvodina, Kosova and Montenegro.

It was this combination of public rallies and the more secret subversion of political and civil institutions that delivered this part of Yugoslavia to Milosevic practically without a fight. It should be recalled that the LCS was the most ardent opponent of all democratization, including in particular the moves toward "bourgeois parliamentary democracy" being made in Slovenia at the time. And in order to maintain support in the Serbian working class, which was fearful of mass unemployment, it adopted a hard-line rhetorical opposition to economic reform. No independent workers' movement emerged.

Only in Kosova did things go wrong, thanks to Albanian counter-mobilization, which is why in Kosova alone did Milosevic find it necessary to use armed force and close down that province's assembly in 1990. Its dissolution marked the end of constitutional rule in Yugoslavia, since from then on the federal assembly itself became inoperative if not illegal. Kosova's counter-mobilization indicated that the main resistance to Serbian fascism would come from nationally based movements in the other republics — just as resistance to fascism during World War II was fiercest in the occupied countries.

If the rise of fascism in Italy and Germany can be causally related to the stresses imposed upon the old order by World War I, then the rise of fascism in Serbia should be viewed as a byproduct of the collapse of Communism. The role played by Victor Emmanuel III in Italy and Hindenburg in Germany (heads of state who presided over the installation of the Mussolini and Hitler regimes — ed.) was in Yugoslavia's case played by the Army, which after Tito's death in 1980 had become an institution far more powerful than either the Italian monarchy or the German presidency.

The Army expressed, in a particularly acute form, the interest that created Milosevic:

“You see a state in which enormous power is concentrated in the hands of people who enjoy privileges they have never earned and are convinced this is a natural and eternal state of affairs. And then you see a situation in which these people are suddenly confronted with a changed reality, where their whole world is falling apart. Automatically they identify their world and their privileges with the state itself and the nation.” (Stanko Cerovic, in Monitor, Montenegro's independent weekly, reviewing the recent book *My View of the Breakup*, published in Belgrade by Yugoslavia's last Minister of Defense General Voljko Kadijevic.)

Whether the Army brought Milosevic to power because it needed such a person, or whether Milosevic after becoming Serbia's strongman won the support of the majority-Serb Yugoslav generals, is a chicken-and-egg question. For those generals Yugoslavia and Serbia were synonymous: Yugoslavia extended, politically and territorially, only to the limit within which Serbia could dominate it.

As Cerovic suggests, this was more than an issue of ethnic loyalty, since the other side of the Yugoslavia-Serbia coin was the truth that only Serbian domination of Yugoslavia ensured for the Army a permanently privileged place in society. No other republic was capable of delivering both sides of this national-military contract.

Territorial Expansionism

The political blueprint for Serbia's separation from Yugoslavia and annexation of other republics' territories was produced in 1986 by no less a body than the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences. In this notorious Memorandum a new national program was elaborated, based on a set of intertwined postulates:

- * That any Yugoslavia not dominated by Serbia was contrary to Serb national interests;
- * That the Communists had created a whole number of spurious nations (Montenegrins, Muslims and Macedonians) in order to weaken the Serb national corpus;
- * That the very federal organization of the Yugoslav state had divided up the Serb nation and was thus inimical to its biological (!) survival — consequently republican borders were illegitimate (or merely “administrative”);
- * That Yugoslavia was a political formula imposed upon the Serbs from the outside, and that Serbs must decide their future on their own, irrespective of — if necessary in conflict with — all other Yugoslav nations.

The subtext of the Memorandum was that the historical clock would be turned back to the Balkan Wars of 1911-12, or even to medieval times — Serbia's daily press soon began publishing wall maps in color of a short-lived Serbian empire in the 14th century! — and that everything should be started all over again, this time not in order to end up with Yugoslavia but with a state of Greater Serbia, in which all Serbs would live without the troubling presence of other national groups, which would have to be removed.

As Mihailo Markovic — former Praxis (one-time Yugoslav left-wing dissident paper) editor, one of the authors of the Memorandum, subsequently vice-president of the SPS and now Milosevic's special advisor — reminded us recently, only an ethnically

pure Serbia can be a “democratic” state.

In a manner similar to the Fascist regimes in Italy and Germany, Milosevic’s too resorted to expansionism as a means for its self-justification and perpetuation. Appropriately, he chose the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo to announce to a crowd of hundreds of thousands that “armed conflict was not excluded.”

Serbia was ready to go to war. A softening-up process of the neighboring republics was already in full swing: By the end of 1990 “Krajinās” (Serbian-held areas) in Croatia and Bosnia- Herzegovina started to emerge as launching pads for outright military intervention. Its operational name was Ram (Frame): New borders, the “frame,” were to be established for Serbia, which must include inter alia Croatia’s Adriatic coast.

It is this drive to the sea that is fueling Serbia’s war effort to this day. Contacts were made immediately with the Italian fascists of the MSI (now part of the Italian ruling coalition), who were invited to revive Italian claims upon Istria and the Slovene littoral. In view of this, the Milosevic-Tudjman (presidents of Serbia and Croatia, who held secret consultations before the open outbreak of war — ed.) on the partition of Bosnia-Herzegovina should be taken as a mere trick, similar to that played by Hitler upon Stalin in 1939 when he invited him to share Poland.

The actual course of the war is well-known and need not be rehearsed here. The annexation of large parts of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina took the form of a total war, waged largely against an unarmed population by an incredibly well-supplied army.

Despite the slogan of “all Serbs in the same state,” the operations were directed by considerations not of ethnicity but of the territories’ economic and military value. Towns that could not be taken or held were destroyed whenever possible. In all occupied territories a systematic practice of “ethnic cleansing” was instituted, irrespective of whether or not the local population offered significant resistance.

Just as Serbia’s regime proved uncompromising in its drive to destroy Yugoslavia so too was it

uncompromising in its campaign to expel all non-Serb populations from the territories intended for inclusion in Greater Serbia. The deportation of the non-Serb population was accompanied by destruction of all traces of their past presence.

Creation of Serb Lebensraum

A precise system was established for the expulsions, designed to break all resistance to removal and ensure that it would be total. This system involved three basic components:

- 1) The use of the Yugoslav National Army (JNA), and later the krajina armies, for straightforward military operations such as holding or capturing a town;
- 2) Use of special paramilitary formations — Arkan's "Tigers," Seselj's "volunteers," Jovic's "White Eagles," etc. — as instruments of direct terror;
- 3) Use of existing or newly created administrative structures to register persons liable for deportation and provide the necessary logistics.

In the West the practice of "ethnic cleansing" has come to be associated only with murderous gangs, but this is quite misleading. It is the combination of these three factors, instruments of a methodically planned policy, which made possible "ethnic cleansing" on such a large scale.

Further, while the expulsion of local population has been practiced by all sides in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, only Serbia has conducted it in a premeditated and systematic manner. This is confirmed, incidentally, by the Commission of Experts in its final Report to UN Secretary General Boutros Ghali (April 1994), which makes obligatory reading for all who wish to understand the character of the war.

What's more, the Commission report states quite clearly that the policy of "ethnic cleansing" — which means "rendering an area ethnically homogeneous by using force or intimidation to remove persons or a given group from

the area” by means of “murder, torture, arbitrary arrests and detention, extra-judicial executions, confinement of civilian population, deliberate military attacks or threats of attacks on civilians and civilian areas, and wanton destruction of property” — form “practices [that] constitute crimes against humanity” and which, moreover, “could fall within the meaning of the Genocide Convention.” (23-24)

The Vienna-based Ludwig-Boltzmann Institute for Human Rights had recently produced a detailed report, based on more than 500 interviews of Bosnian refugees, on ethnic-cleansing operations in the city of Zvornik (61% Muslim, 29% Serb) between April and June 1992. What happened there is typical of a whole string of towns, in Croatia but particularly in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

On the eve of the attack, Serb families left the town. The military attack came next, with heavy artillery shelling coming both from Serbia and from JNA positions in Bosnia. The city was captured by JNA infantry, assisted by Arkan’s units, and all exit routes closed.

The Arkanovci — who operated under a separate authority — then constituted a reign of terror, including random executions, murder, rape and looting, in which they were joined by Seselj’s, Jovic’s and various other groups of “volunteers.” A night curfew was immediately imposed, which remained in force until the “ethnic cleansing” was completed. Muslim men were sent into locally established detention centers, where many of them died under torture.

Those who could flee did so. This was the stage of “unorganized” expulsion of the Muslim population. After that came the next step: total expulsion using administrative measures. For this to happen, it was necessary to round up all those hiding in the city, or its immediate surroundings, in order to register them.

This was accomplished by repeated radio broadcasts appealing to the people to return. Departure was possible only upon the renunciation of all property. Each person was then issued an ID. In early June the

entire Muslim population of Zvornik and neighboring villages was deported in buses or trucks, either across Serbia into Hungary or into Bosnian-held territory (Tuzla).

As the Commission of Experts Final Report states: "It was only after the Muslim inhabitants, not only from the town but from the entire region, had returned and were thus ready to be 'gathered' that their total and final expulsion became possible. This enabled the oppressors not only to move them away from the Zvornik territory by means of organized deportations, but also to deport them across the national territories of former Yugoslavia."

Zvornik and its neighborhood became in this way an "ethnically Purified" area — an exclusively Serb lebensraum ("living space," a term made infamous by Nazi Germany — ed.). It must be stressed that the only alternative to deportation was death. This is true as much of Zvornik, which had to be taken in order to be "cleansed," as for Banja Luka which was in JNA hands from before the war actually began. In this part of Bosnia, out of the prewar population of over half a million Muslims and Croats, only an estimated 70,000 were left in 1994— and their exodus is continuing.

As I write this text I read in the British press that "Serb military police, wielding truncheons and rifle butts, beat up Muslim and Croat civilians as they were queuing to leave a Serb-held region in northern Bosnia." (The Guardian, July 6, 1994) The form in which the "final solution" for the non-Serb population in the projected Greater Serbia is being achieved has depended crucially on the willingness of the neighboring countries to accept refugees. They leave behind dead cities and burnt-out villages.

Conclusion

The Western powers' Contact Group plan for the partition of Bosnia-Herzegovina is not a peace plan, but a reward to territorial aggression and genocide. The United States in endorsing this plan has joined the camp of appeasers of fascism in Europe — Britain, France and Russia. President Clinton

continues to speak of war criminals being punished but nobody believes him, since they have already been transformed into statesmen.

If, in Arno Mayer's memorable phrase, the October Revolution was the parchment upon which the Treaty of Versailles was written, then the Bosnia Partition Plan brings the message of international legitimation of fascism.

Notes

1. The author is referring here to the left's tendency to think of the Russian Revolution purely in class terms, without understanding the complex national questions that it also involved, a topic obviously too massive for the scope of this article — ed.

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2. Branka Magas is the author of *The Destruction of Yugoslavia: Tracking the Breakup, 1980-92* (Verso, 1993) and of many articles in this and other journals of the left. The essay here vividly portrays a process — confusing perhaps because it is still unfolding, but for that reason all the more important to understand — of the emergence of the Serbian state from the breakup of Yugoslavia. It is the emergence of a post-Stalinist state of a special type, in which the party-state has remained largely intact to be turned into a racist, even genocidal project: the removal or extermination of populations rooted for centuries on the lands this state now seeks to conquer and “purify.” The author views this Serbian state as fascist, a characterization with which the ATC editors cannot agree (we think of fascism as a totalitarian capitalist regime that arises to choke off a potential revolutionary threat from the working class, a threat that

didn't exist in this context). We also feel that her characterization of the positions of "most left groups" is overly sweeping. The most important fact remains, however, that the war of expansion and ethnic cleansing launched against Croatia and then Bosnia-Herzegovina is rooted in the specific character of the Serbian state, posing issues that the left cannot ignore or wish away. This essay thus offers an important contribution to an absolutely crucial discussion. — ed.

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